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# For What Are Whites to Hope?

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Before directly addressing the titular question, this chapter examines how conceptions of hope often lead us astray, reaffirming rather than challenging the status quo. In analytic philosophy, hope is often understood as a desire that is not entirely justified with reasons. In critical theory, hope has recently been looked upon suspiciously, as an affect the circulation of which is intensified by neoliberal economics. In mid-twentieth-century German theology and theory, hope is viewed as entirely other-worldly. In liberation theology, the object of hope is identification with the poor. This article argues that each of these views produces antinomies, and each of these views ends up perpetuating the status quo: in a racial context, white supremacy. After exploring the antinomies of hope, the article urges that whites are to embrace these antinomies. They are to hope for despair.

**KEYWORDS** race, anti-blackness, afro-pessimism, theological virtues, hope, whiteness

## **Preface: the hope of black theology**

These past few months have seen an astounding transformation in racial politics in the United States. Trayvon Martin was a moment, but with the addition of Eric Garner and Michael Brown we now have a movement. These names stand for both a change in consciousness and concrete mobilizations. I never saw as many Black students gathered together on my campus as I did in front of our chapel to honor the memory of Trayvon Martin, and to call for action. I never heard so many Black and white students on my campus naming police violence as a problem, not only in the halls but on posters at marches, as I did after the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown. Something is happening that is unprecedented in my generation. The careful management of Blackness by the apparatus of diversity has been exposed as a farce, Chief Diversity Officers and cultural awareness programming concealing the daily violence and humiliation that never was hidden from “the least of these.” Anti-Blackness was concealed from those who were anti-Black, and the story of multicultural harmony was sold to Blacks themselves. It was bought by some middle class Blacks but never really believed. False consciousness can only go so far down when faced with the realities of the police and courts. Even so, false

consciousness is powerful, maintaining the inertia of the status quo, until it does not. Those names—Trayvon, Eric, Michael—gather those memories of official violence, lending their names to violence which had gone unnamed, interrupting the inertia of the status quo.

James Cone describes the interruption that was the Black Power movement, an interruption that caused him to set aside his dissertation on Barth, to step away from his white liberal professors, and to reimagine theology from the perspective of Blacks.<sup>1</sup> Three decades have passed, and that interruption, like the interruption affected by Martin Luther King, Jr., has been incorporated into the status quo. King represents diversity for the nation; Cone represents diversity for the theological guild. We are in an era of neoliberal multiculturalism.<sup>2</sup> Today, diversity means multi-colored Band-Aids on the six gunshot wounds in Michael Brown's dead body. It is easy to say, hopelessly, that the institutional incorporation and subsequent political impotence of those names, King and Cone, was inevitable. They performed an appealing—because safe: short, high-pitched—form of Black masculinity that was ostensibly directed at Black audiences but actually did its work among white audiences. In King's case, this critique of Black leadership is by now well-worn by scholars and activists. We Black people did not need a leader to tell us we were oppressed and that change could, some day, come. Black people in the United States have known this since the Middle Passage. Black people did not need to be told where to march; grassroots organizers had been unglamorously organizing for years, since time immemorial. In short, charismatic leadership is more likely to bring manipulation than salvation.<sup>3</sup> It manipulates hopes, attracting people to divinized worldly leaders and away from both the concrete and the other-worldly.

It would be uncharitable and unrealistic to extrapolate from these remarks about King conclusions about Cone. In his earliest writings, Cone stridently affirmed the unique power of Black theological vision; it was only as the 1970s wore on into the 1980s and beyond that Cone embraced Black theology as contextual theology, as one vantage point among many from which to speak of God.<sup>4</sup> With King killed, it was the public, or the powers that be, that did the work of diversifying King, of ushering him into our era of neoliberal multiculturalism. Cone did this work himself, changing his views with the changing times. Yet Cone's early theological reflections were never as easily assimilable into a multicultural mainstream as King's theological vision. In a sense, it is lucky that there was Cone to do the assimilating himself. My worry, to state it bluntly, is that Cone's personal embodiment as Black Theology functions as King's personal embodiment as Integration. Black Christians have been doing Black Theology since time immemorial; it is whites who need a James Cone, and it is whites to whom he, essentially speaks.

My point in these reflections on Cone and King is to warn against a certain response to our current moment of racial crises, to warn against a certain style of hope. We do not need a leader, an Al Sharpton (who conveniently presents himself as both King and Cone at once). We do not need Black elites telling Black

<sup>1</sup> Cone, *Risks of Faith*.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*.

<sup>3</sup> Carson, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle"; Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*.

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd, "Paradox and Tradition in Black Theology."

folks about Black oppression or urging Black folks to organize, or to pray. What Black elites—Black scholars and Black theologians—can do is weaken the intellectual defenses of white supremacy. This means ideology critique: challenging the hold that certain ideas have, certain ideas that make the status quo seem natural. In other words, rather than Black elites performing their Blackness essentially for a white audience, Black elites ought to directly address that white audience, naming what is taken for granted by those whites, naming that conventional wisdom that is actually constitutive of whiteness. In ideology critique (in theological terms this is the critique of idolatry), the space is cleared for the ongoing organizing efforts of ordinary Blacks to flourish, and for the ongoing prayers of ordinary Black Christians to be voiced. For this the Black theologian should hope: to weaken the hold of the idols of white supremacy so that the least of these can speak for themselves. It is only in their voices, in their movements, that we are sure to find the divine.

This has been my apologia for conceptual work, for what might seem like a venture into the realm of abstraction on a topic that calls for the practical. The question—for what are whites to hope—would seem to call for a specific, concrete answer, but I am more concerned with how this question is approached, how it is understood, and why it is deemed pressing. In what follows I sketch conceptual terrain. I hypothesize that hope often functions to support the status quo—specifically in a racial context, this means supporting white supremacy.<sup>5</sup> Hope does this in various ways, for hope is used variously, and I see no reason to suppose that all usages point to the same concept. My efforts are intended to be more suggestive than conclusive, asking new questions rather than providing new answers. But I do think these reflections have practical significance, at least in the negative. Religious communities, and specifically Christian communities, have a tendency to sanctify profane hopes, or profane styles of hoping, and this deserves the name idolatry. To be clear, I am not arguing that all secular hopes are idolatrous, just as it would be absurd to argue that all secular loves are idolatrous. Rather, hopes are idolatrous if they are not oriented by our relationship to the good, or God, just as loves are idolatrous if they are not so oriented. Aquinas puts it strongly: God is the ultimate object of all our proper hopes, as of our proper loves, even when those hopes or loves seem directed at worldly objects or people. But whiteness has nothing to do with godliness, and hope understood in such a way as to secure the mythology of white supremacy must not be understood as theological.

It may be objected that the discussion to follow oversimplifies complex racial dynamics. Surely the world is not made up only of Black and white. Is this not a particularly American view of race, and a view of race that is less and less relevant in the United States as Latino, Asian American, and other non-white communities expand? Yet the point Black radical intellectuals have been making for decades, a point finally taken up in the mainstream through the Twitter hashtag Black Lives Matter, is that there is something peculiar about anti-Black racism that sets it apart. Narratives of racial progress for Blacks have been given the lie, and intellectual currents that question whether there is anything at all for which Blacks can hope

<sup>5</sup> I develop an argument against hope as a theological virtue—without particular focus on race—in Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*.

has attracted new attention. These currents, known collectively as Afro-pessimism, pose a profound theological challenge.<sup>6</sup> Rather than arguing about the specificity or depth of anti-Black racism, here I ask the reader to take the Afro-pessimist challenge as plausible and to explore what this would mean for a central theological category, hope. Specifically, I am interested in how various ways in which hope is currently understood each play into the cultural logic of white supremacy, affirming the status quo even as they promise transformation. With these ordinary approaches to hope tainted, we can finally turn to the titular question of this essay. This, I suggest, is the way to approach hope from the perspective of Black theology: naming and challenging the perspectives that distort theological concepts and so challenging white theology, which is another name for secularism.<sup>7</sup> Of course the claim of Black theology is stronger: that Black theology just is Christian theology. In this context, the example of race, and the way hope affirms white supremacy, is but a special case of a broader problem with hope. Too often, hope is understood in a way that affirms rather than challenges the status quo. Too often, hope is understood as secular rather than theological.

### Hope as desire

In nearly all secular philosophical accounts of hope today, hope is analyzed as a desire that is not certain to be fulfilled.<sup>8</sup> Understood in this way, hope is not oriented towards the good. Hope is a descriptive rather than a normative term. Or, if hopes are to be judged, they are to be judged based on whether an individual has reason to so desire, not whether the object hoped for is good in itself. This approach admirably links hope and reason, ensuring that hope does not float freely in an imagined realm of pure feeling. But by tethering hope to reason and desire, hope becomes isolated from the broader context of a life and the world. Analyzing hope becomes a matter of counting and weighing discrete reasons and desires at a particular moment in a particular life. The individual is imagined as an abstracted bundle of desire—a desire for friends, a desire for money, or a desire to live in a warm climate. One does not habitually hope, repeatedly aiming one's passion in certain directions; hope is simply a fact about what one is doing at a particular moment. Community is effectively irrelevant for hope as desire in this way; hopes are accountable to nothing beyond the individual. If a hope is to be judged wrong, it could only be because an individual makes errors of reasoning or perception concerning her own desires.

When hope is understood in this way, we forget that hope is cultivated in community, and we forget that hopes may be evaluated in terms other than rational self-interest. A hope for equality or for racial justice would be motivated by an individual desire, not by the goodness of the end desired. This individual desire would be motivated by reasons, and it could be challenged or refined by exchanging reasons with others. Hope understood in this way but does not result in a disposition

<sup>6</sup> See Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black*.

<sup>7</sup> Lloyd, "Managing Race, Managing Religion".

<sup>8</sup> For an elaboration on this definition, see Martin, *How We Hope*. For a clear account of the relationship between reasons and desires understood along these lines, see Parfit, *On What Matters*.

to act in certain ways. A reason for action is one reason among many; there are also many reasons not to act in ways that advance racial justice (for example, desires for social stability, desires to preserve status, desires to maintain the economic benefits that whites derive from racism). Because reasons are weighed differently at each moment, there is no sense of hope as a habit on this view. Yet we have a strong intuition that hope does resemble a disposition, and we have a strong intuition that hope cannot be confined to the bounds of the atomized self. What are the consequences of understanding hope as desire in this way? When hope is taken to be a desire for a specific state of affairs—racial justice conceived in a particular way, for example—it is invested in and secures the ways that we see the world today. That hoped-for state of affairs is hoped-for in the language, as it were, that we speak here, now. But the language that we speak here, now, is deeply distorted by racial injustice. The reasons we have for our current desires are based on what we consider facts about the world, but these facts are seen through racializing lenses. The dramatic transformation that is necessary to free ourselves from racialized ways of perceiving and acting cannot be plotted from the perspective of the present.

### Hope as affect

Hope is sometimes taken to be in the head, but at other times it is taken to be in the heart, as it were. Hope is sometimes understood as a reasonable but unlikely desire, and it is sometimes understood as an affect. As an affect, hope becomes a personality type, and a mood. There are some people who are hopeful. They see the glass half full. Others are not hopeful, seeing the glass half empty. After a string of successes an individual is more hopeful than after a string of defeats. In youth an individual is more hopeful than in middle age. Further, affects circulate; they are contagious.<sup>9</sup> To be surrounded by hopeful people increases the hopefulness of one who is otherwise not particularly hopeful. There are cultures that might be said to include a robust swirl of hopefulness: elite high schools preparing students for Ivy League colleges, for instance, or a running club training for a marathon, or the fans of a sports team, or the supporters of a political candidate. Some have argued recently that capitalism depends on and cultivates the circulation of hope, with the individual consumer or worker perennially seeing her economic glass half full.<sup>10</sup> Understood as affect, hope is not essentially a belief about the future but rather a feeling about the future; if it seems that hopeful people believe things about the future it is because that is how their feeling manifests itself. Moreover, as an affect, hope on this view is not reducible to a disposition. It is not that a hopeful individual tends to respond to adverse circumstances by persevering (that, incidentally, is faith).<sup>11</sup> Rather, affects are deeper than any of their visible manifestations in dispositions; an affect names the passions of the heart. Affects sometimes, but not always, express themselves in words or actions; they do not necessarily do so consistently.

Hope, on this view, is not directed at a certain object. Circumstances may be dire, but there remains a feeling that they will certainly improve. Racism may be

<sup>9</sup> See especially Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*.

<sup>10</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Adams, "Moral Faith."

trenchant and cruel, but it will not last forever. Such a feeling is cultivated as it circulates: listening to King's "I Have a Dream" speech, in an interracial dialogue group, or reading tweets. Yet the connection between affect and action is tenuous, and particularly so when affect circulates in a space that necessarily downplays actually existing racial disparities. When hope for racial justice is cultivated by being around others who hope for racial justice, the problem of racial justice is understood as being out there, something for us, who are racially unmarked, to go work towards. In addition to eliding the complicity of those who hope, this way of understanding hope tends to mask precisely the questions of judgment, of exchanging reasons, over which the account of hope as desire obsessed. If hope circulates as affect, how is it to be challenged, refined, or made actionable?<sup>12</sup> Further, the feeling of hope from a position of privilege is qualitatively different from the feeling of hope from a marginal position. The former tends towards optimism while the latter interrupts a world of despair. Seeing a glass half full is quite a different experience when you are at a restaurant and when you are trudging through a desert. Christopher Lasch has compellingly argued that optimism is quite a different creature than hope: optimism entrenches the interests of the wealthy and powerful by assuring all that the way society is structured is the way it ought to be structured.<sup>13</sup> What seems amiss now will soon be corrected.

### Hope as rhetoric

When we hear someone proclaim that they hope for the end to racial injustice, this statement may be interpreted in three ways. It can be interpreted as expressing hope as desire or affect, discussed above, or it can be interpreted as rhetoric, a speech act intended to persuade. Hope's rhetorical power is famous, or infamous: it stood metonymically for all of Barack Obama's rhetorical skill in his 2008 presidential campaign. Obama was using language to mobilize the masses, not representing any desire he held about the future (his desires were notoriously realist) and not describing his affective state (which was notoriously flat). Certainly one of the ways that rhetoric works to persuade is by tapping the affect of listeners, by catalyzing the circulation of affect, but rhetoric itself is quite distinct from affect, and rhetoric uses both reason and affect to persuade.<sup>14</sup> Most of the time we hear the word hope used, at least in public discourse in the United States, it connotes the rhetoric of hope rather than hope as affect or desire.

It is tempting to cynically dismiss all of the language of hope as it concerns race, as it concerns whites desiring racial progress, as *mere* rhetoric. At least as used in the white public sphere, the language of hope regarding race neither suggests an affect nor a desire on the part of the speaker. It attempts to persuade listeners first and foremost that the problem of race is not intractable, that a solution will inevitably be found. A solution will inevitably be found because the rhetoric of hope relies on a commitment to historical progress. All worldly problems will, sooner or later, be resolved because of human ingenuity. Further, the language of hope in

<sup>12</sup> Zerilli, "The Turn to Affect and the Problem of Judgment."

<sup>13</sup> Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*.

<sup>14</sup> See Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*.

the white public sphere, whether employed by whites or Blacks, persuades Blacks that racial injustice will come to an end. For both audiences, ironically, hope as rhetoric at once implies that humans have the capacity to rectify racial injustices and absolves individual humans of the responsibility to fight racial injustice. Because history is moving in the direction of racial equality, does it really matter whether I personally join the struggle? Why would history need me to move it along? Some would object that the rhetoric of hope is meant to disrupt stasis. Things would remain the same indefinitely if there was not a sense that they could change, and change for the better. But on questions of racial justice, and of white involvement in racial justice struggles, both doing nothing and doing something, from a position of privilege, are problematic. The something that could be done, from a position of privilege, is something shaped by the perspective of that privilege, one of the options visible to those privileged. More often than not, such courses of action preserve privilege, and systematic racial injustice.

## Hope as novelty

That hope often has regressive rather than progressive effects has not gone unnoticed. Hope as desire, as affect, and as rhetoric affirm the status quo, but might there be a way to understand hope differently, more theologically? In the wake of the Nazi genocide, some European thinkers sought to rejuvenated hope, conceiving of it in new ways that intentionally challenged the status quo. The Marxist social theorist Ernst Bloch and the Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann sought to retrieve a sense of hope as the radically new that they found in Christianity.<sup>15</sup> As a Marxist and a Protestant, respectively, it was not so much the Christian intellectual tradition to which Bloch and Moltmann turned as it was to the Bible. Bloch himself was of Jewish ancestry, and he, like Walter Benjamin, introduced into Marxist social theory a sense of the Messianic. Moltmann was deeply influenced by Bloch's theoretical work and found in the New Testament evidence for a sense of the Messianic animating Christianity. Concisely, this sense of the Messianic is the radically new and unexpected breaking into history. To hope means to refuse to be limited to the possibilities of the present, to the apparent configuration of the world today. In other words, in response to the complicity of many conceptions of hope with the status quo, hope was now defined simply as an orientation towards that which is different from the status quo. On this account, hope means orienting a life around the sense that dramatic change will come, and around a further commitment that we cannot know when or where or how this change will come. At most we can make ourselves ready. Hope, on this view, is not desire nor affect nor rhetoric but something deeper, something that inheres in the experience of life itself. We humans have a deep longing that cannot be sated by anything around us, no matter how many of our specific desires are fulfilled. That deep longing is a reminder that the world can and will be radically different in the future, radically new. It is a longing that may be expressed in specific desires, or in affect, or in rhetoric, but it

<sup>15</sup> See particularly Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*; Moltmann, *A Theology of Hope*.



is more than any of these. Hope must be investigated by means of phenomenology, tracking the phenomenon of hope beyond its manifestations.

Moltmann spent the 1967–1968 academic year at Duke, visiting the US South at the height of racial turmoil. He dedicated the lectures he gave during that year, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*, to Martin Luther King, Jr., and he befriended James Cone.<sup>16</sup> In an essay provocatively titled, “Black Theology for Whites,” Moltmann summarizes the importance he sees in Black theology: “Black theology opens up for the theology of the whites the unique chance to free itself from the constitutional blindness of white society, and to become Christian theology.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, Black theology can allow Christian theology to become post-racial, to overcome the problem of race. Such a conclusion follows naturally from the view of hope developed by Bloch and Moltmann. On their view, hope disregards the terms of the present world, welcoming the radically new—and so disregards whiteness and Blackness, welcoming a world where race plays no role. While the election of Barack Obama seemed to open a post-racial era in the United States, the years since his election have demonstrated that anti-Black racism is alive and well, raising difficult questions about whether hope for a post-racial world might actually elide and so reinforce deep-seeded, virulent racism.

Those who would understand hope as novelty may dismiss this worry by arguing that an orientation towards future possibility manifests as challenges to the specific practices and institutions that maintain the status quo. Specifically, in the case of race, dismantling white supremacy would be the way an eschatological vision of post-racialism manifests. Moltmann, after all, thinks Black suffering reveals “the constitutional blindness of white society.” However, as soon as there is a process to get from here to there, from our current world to the reconfigured, colorblind world for which we hope, radical newness is no longer involved. The new world is no longer unexpected. We are back to the rhetoric of hope—of the new, of progress—combined with an individual’s hope, as desire for this or that reform. Once again, we have a conception of hope that allows whites to see themselves as committed to racial transformation, to achieving a colorblind society, while actually reinforcing the status quo.

## Hope as poverty

Frustrated with the social and political limitations of hope conceived as novelty, liberation theologians sought a conception of hope more clearly aligned with genuine social transformation.<sup>18</sup> On this even more oppositional understanding of hope, genuine hope means the hope to become poor—or, in the case of Black theology, the hope to become Black.<sup>19</sup> God is present among the poor and Black, among “the least of these,” so hoping to become poor or Black means hoping to participate more fully in God. Privilege distorts perception and personality; because of this, any desires or affect or rhetoric of the bourgeoisie will be misguided. Middle class hope

<sup>16</sup> Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*.

<sup>17</sup> Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 215.

<sup>18</sup> See Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*.

<sup>19</sup> See especially Perkinson, *White Theology*; Herzog, *Liberation Theology*; Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*.

is, in a theological idiom, directed away from God. Moreover, from this perspective hope understood as novelty, as an orientation towards the radically new, will go wrong unless the material conditions of the one who hopes change. What counts as radically new for the bourgeoisie is not radically new because the bourgeoisie misperceives the status quo; the bourgeoisie is so invested, consciously or unconsciously, in maintaining the worldly order that the world appears to them different than it really is. The poor have an epistemological privilege because the poor, broadly conceived to include all marginalized communities, are not invested in the status quo—it is the status quo that marginalizes them—and so their hope can turn away from worldly things, towards the truly other, towards the divine.<sup>20</sup>

What does it mean to hope to become poor or Black? On the one hand, it is tempting to avoid the apparent difficulties of this question by considering poverty and Blackness as symbolic categories (as James Cone puts it, Blackness is “ontological”). What they symbolize is marginalization. But the argument here is more subtle. God dwells with “the least of these,” but who “the least of these” refers to varies by time and place. Disclaiming privilege is not enough: dwelling with the most disadvantaged is necessary. And what does this mean? It may mean living in a certain neighborhood, shopping at certain stores, eating at certain restaurants, wearing certain clothes, or choosing certain careers. Privilege is not an abstract quantum but maintained by its exercise: the habitus must be lived to be a habitus.<sup>21</sup> White skin will not darken, but whiteness has never really been about skin color; skin color only serves as a proxy for race. The formation provided by a privileged upbringing will never entirely stop shaping one’s life, but that is why such renunciation requires hope—hope that, one day, the rich woman will be mistaken for a poor woman and the white man mistaken for a Black man. This is hope for a post-racial, post-class world, for a world that is radically otherwise, but it is hope that is only possible from the position of poverty.

This understanding of hope is oriented by God: it is hope to participate in God by taking the earthly form that is closest to God, that of the poor, understood broadly. The specific desires entailed by the hope to be poor, such as the desire to live in a certain place or to eat a certain food, are desires that are oriented by the overarching hope to participate in God. This understanding of hope also makes clear how hope is a gift of God: to hope to become poor requires a renunciation of worldly hopes. When hope is understood as the hope for poverty hope is also understood as a virtue: it is the disposition to act as the poor would in whatever circumstances present themselves. However, it is not quite right to call this understanding of hope a virtue because virtue implies a disposition cultivated in community. For the wealthy who would become poor, hope requires detaching oneself from community, severing bonds to those who shaped one’s self. Yes, new relationships are to be built and a new community is to be formed, with the poor or Black or otherwise marginal, but that community can never become fully one’s own because of the residuum of privilege. This residuum makes the hope of the wealthy renouncer and the “naturally” poor manifest differently. The hope of the privileged manifests, first and foremost, as the desire to renounce privilege; the hope of the marginalized manifests, first

<sup>20</sup> This point is developed in a philosophical register by Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*.

<sup>21</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

and foremost, as the desire to overturn the social and political structures that secure privilege. The hope to renounce privilege is a lonely hope, for it by definition cannot tolerate a community of those who similarly hope. When there is no community to nurture such hope, it degrades, threatening to become a desire to identify with titillating otherness. Such hope can become vicious: witness the case of Rachel Dolezal, the white woman from Montana who, ostensibly out of commitment to racial justice, “became” Black. The possible nobility of her intentions was obscured by her pathologically confused statements and farcical self-presentation because she did not have a community to whom she could be held continually accountable. Her privilege was never fully renounced—she became a local leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—and the publicity she eventually garnered called into question the sincerity of all who wish to renounce their privilege.

### Hope as theological virtue

What if the five accounts of hope limned above are all ways that hope is viewed from the perspective of our secular age, degradations of a once robust understanding of hope as a theological virtue? I do not intend to argue that this is the case, only to float the possibility in the interest of motivating reflection on what a post-secular, or theological, understanding of hope might look like. As a theological virtue, hope is a disposition to have one’s passion directed towards the good—where the good is that which images God, the highest good. As a theological virtue, hope is not entirely learned through community practice, it is also infused by God. Members of a community may desire things that are possible but not certain; this is not enough to teach a young person growing up in the community to hope, for there are many such worldly desires that are not good (getting away with cheating, for example). Without God’s gift of hope, human passion is directed at objects both good and bad; with God’s gift of hope, human passion is oriented towards good objects. Although acculturation is not sufficient to learn the virtue of hope, participation in a community of those who hope, of those who share in the divine gift of hope, nurtures the virtue of hope. Even with the divine gift of hope, worldly pressures can distort the virtue if not properly nurtured, through the Church. These are the key features of hope as understood in the Christian theological tradition.

When hope is considered as a theological virtue it is aimed at objects that are good in themselves, because they reflect the image of God, not because of individual preference and not because of community consensus. If racial equity is a good, as it certainly must be, then those who have the virtue of hope would be disposed to direct their passion towards racial equity naturally, as it were, not as a result of balancing reasons for and against. It is only in extraordinary circumstances when dispositions are short-circuited. Hope as a theological virtue promises a way of understanding the Church as a community sharing a hope for racial justice in opposition to mainstream society. Indeed, as a place where hope is nurtured, the Church would scrutinize hopes for racial reform articulated by liberals whose hopes were not fully directed at the good. Of course the churches are not the Church, and actual existing churches never nurture hope perfectly. But perhaps we can see in the Civil Rights

Movement (or the anti-apartheid struggle, or the nascent Black Lives Matter campaign) a moment when something like the Church invisible manifests, nurturing the virtue of hope rather than affirming individualized, secular hopes.

Understanding hope as a theological virtue rejects the individualism of other conceptions of hope. It appreciates that hope is a disposition nurtured in community—in the racial context, in a community struggling against racial injustice. But the insights tracked as the understanding of hope has been refined should not be forgotten. The move towards hope as novelty and, further, hope as poverty are essential refinements, preserving hope from contamination by worldly interests. Yet they still seem invested in an aspect of worldliness, of secularity: they leave a focus on the individual that prevents hope from being understood as cultivated in community. The question, then, is how to bring together hope as a theological virtue with the insights of those who would understand hope as novelty or as poverty. Put another way, in the context of anti-Black racism, what would a community of whites committed to renouncing privilege look like? It seems we have reached an antinomy, for when the privileged act in concert, whatever their goal, the result is to further privilege: social capital, like all capital, is fecund. Perhaps we are left hopeless.

## White tears

At least since Trayvon Martin was killed in 2012, Black commenters on social media have used the phrase, or hashtag, white tears to denote two distinct phenomena: (1) white complaints about the difficulties they encounter, oblivious to the enormous privilege they wield and oblivious to the difficulties an order of magnitude more grave faced by Blacks; and (2) ostensibly progressive whites taking offense at being labeled racist by Blacks, for instance when Blacks ask white supporters to take a secondary role at an anti-racism protest. Although these two usages are distinct, they both suggest frustration combined with naïveté. In the first case, whites who know little about the depths of racism struggle to understand why everyone is not just treated as equal. In the second case, whites who do know, intellectually, about the depths of racism are so accustomed to exercising their race privilege that an explicit refusal of this privilege causes barely repressed guilt to surface—in tears. Those tears are themselves a re-assertion of privilege, a performance of privilege. Social scripts dictate that crying people, especially crying white people, and most especially crying white women must be comforted. To comfort usually means to apologize, or to say that you really did not mean to offend, or that everything will be alright—each of these a reaffirmation of white supremacy. How, then, are whites to despair?

This question may seem corollary to the question of white hope, but they are actually much more closely related. Despair, after all, is hopelessness. Kierkegaard compellingly inserts despair at the very center of religious life.<sup>22</sup> He argues that one must first despair before one can truly have faith, or love, or hope. Despair wipes out false gods and focuses our attention solely on one true God, on a God qualitatively

<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*. For a thorough discussion of Kierkegaard on despair and hope, see Bernier, *The Task of Hope in Kierkegaard*.

different from the world. Before we despair our hopes are oriented by the world, by the secular rhetoric of hope and by our own desires and feelings. After we despair, hope becomes a virtue, a disposition oriented by God, repeatedly expressed in the circumstances we encounter. Of course despair is not encountered only once in a lifetime; that story is a heuristic. Despair is encountered repeatedly, cleansing us of idolatrous hopes and reorienting our hopes towards the ultimate good, God. In other words, to hope properly one must despair properly.

Formal instruction in despair is unnecessary for the marginalized and oppressed; life offers us plenty of opportunities to learn about despair naturally, as it were. The policeman stops us for no reason, or the underfunded bus system makes us perpetually late for work and costs us our job, or the only grocery store in the neighborhood moves to the suburbs. In contrast, privilege mutes despair. It prevents situations from occurring that might give rise to despair and it reduces the severity of those situations that do arise. An ill child gets the best medical care money can buy, or at least that is how it is marketed. A lost job might require a second mortgage, but owning a house makes that possible; a family member's drug arrest is resolved with the help of a savvy lawyer. The power of the phrase white tears is in capturing this distinction between the despair of the poor and the despair of the privileged. The phrase names the superficiality of white misfortune: "white tears" vaguely echoes "crocodile tears." White tears mark the simulacrum of despair. White misfortune seems grave, warranting tears, but is nowhere near the depths of despair that would cleanse the self of its belief in idols and orient the self towards the divine. The one who is shedding white tears seems impossibly trapped between good intentions to help and the violence done by that help since it flows from a position of privilege. From the perspective of the white person in tears, it feels as if there is no hope. And in both cases this is an illusion: it is an affect worn rather than existentially felt, Braxton Hicks contractions rather than labor pains. Kierkegaard offers the felicitous phrase "inauthentic despair."

How are whites to despair? The answer is closely tied with the suggestion that whites are to hope to become Black—which is to say, to entirely renounce race privilege, not just in this moment, for this rally or in this meeting. The realization that renouncing privilege, in the context of the United States in the twenty-first century, requires whites to become Black (and poor) does warrant genuine despair. After all, skin color does over-determine race, and for a white to become Black is nearly impossible. But together with this despair at the difficulty of renouncing privilege is the hope that the good might be pursued, that whites now may be able to participate in God as long as all idols are abandoned—a hope against hope. The hope to become poor, or Black, must be accompanied by despair so that this hope does not become fantasy, so that it does not become yet another idol. The hope to become poor, or Black, that is to say the proper hope of whites, is a despairing hope, a hope for hopelessness.

This way of understanding hope, as a hope for hopelessness through the renunciation of privilege, offers a way of bringing together hope as a theological virtue, practiced in community, and hope as poverty. It seemed as though the desire to become poor, or Black, foreclosed hope in community, making hope nearly impossible to maintain, compounding despair. But now we can see that despair is not a bad thing; it teaches. It offers training in hope. There may be no community to

nurture the imperative to become poor, or become Black, but despair can serve as substitute teacher, purging errors and making possible proper dispositions. That there is no community to support the imperatives of the privileged is yet another reason for the privileged to despair, but this despair need not be fatal. Indeed, despair promises to open new possibilities for faith, hope, and love, and for community. But these are new possibilities that cannot be the object of hope: they are divine gifts given once human hubris is abandoned. To reject such hubris means rejecting the desire to get hope right, to know the object or mechanism of hope, and instead to hope only for despair. Rachel Dolezal thought she could hope rightly on her own, to become Black—hubris. When renouncing privilege is the prerequisite for hope, hope is impossible. This impossibility fuels despair: that for which whites should hope.

Although the hope for despair may seem a lonely hope, it is in fact a hope oriented towards and accountable to a community. This is not an existing community, it is a community not yet in existence, a community of those who now despair singularly—an eschatological community.<sup>23</sup> In other words, community must be understood theologically, not empirically, with the faith that this theological vision of community will become clearer only as despair becomes deeper, only as worldly hopes are lost. Yes, this eschatological community is post-racial, but what a post-racial community would look like is impossible to see from the perspective of the present—and racism digs in deeper every time well-meaning whites forget that.

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<sup>23</sup> For philosophical accounts of such community, see, for example, Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*; Agamben, *The Coming Community*.

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